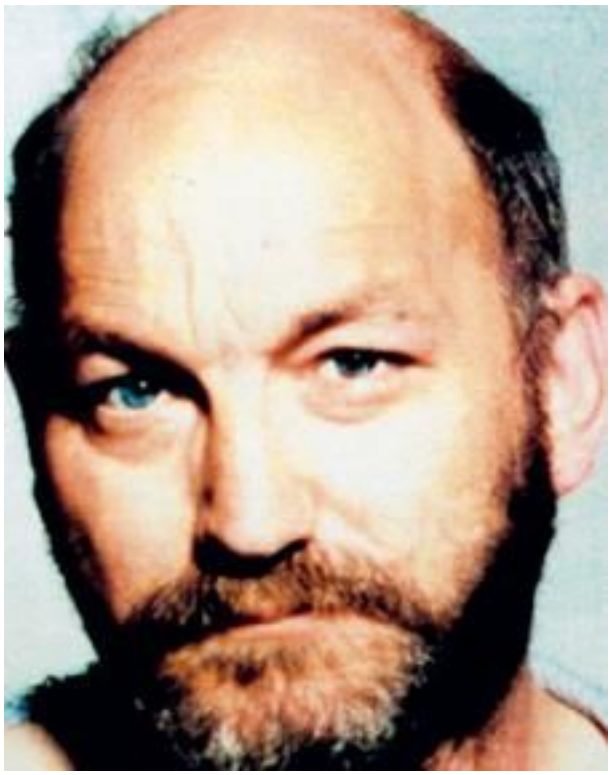
Robert Black — The face of true evil

Yesterday, Robert Black was convicted of the 1981 murder of a 9 year old girl. It was his fourth murder conviction, and those who know him best believe he has committed many more.



Robert Black

Northern Ireland has seen some of the most shocking murders ever perpetrated in these islands, the overwhelming majority of them with some sort of terrorist connection. Yesterday, with The Troubles largely behind it, the citizens of that at times embittered province saw the file closed on a different kind of murder.

Black's trial for the murder of 9 year old Jennifer Cardy was scheduled to begin last year, but was delayed because the defence had 200,000 (two hundred thousand) pieces of evidence to review. As Black was then 62 years old and already a convicted triple killer, some people might have questioned the economics if not the wisdom of trying him yet again when under our system he can in practice suffer no further punishment. It might also have been argued that the human resources put into a fourth murder trial could have been put to better use, but some crimes transcend mere money, mere inconvenience and mere delay. At least that is the way the police, the judicial system and the parents of Jennifer Cardy saw it.

Robert Black's life story reads like a horror novel. Although he had a difficult childhood, and suffered abuse himself, he repaid his innocent victims in spades. A sexual predator from his youth, he moved to London from his native Scotland after serving time in borstal – a now defunct punishment for young offenders.

Black found work as a van driver, and it was his combining his peripatetic work with his sadistic pleasures that enabled him to evade justice for so long. In July 1982, he raped and strangled 11 year old Susan Maxwell, dumping her body some 250 miles from where he abducted her. Just under a year later, he kidnapped and murdered 5 year old Caroline Hogg. Her body was likewise dumped hundreds of miles away, but was so decomposed that nothing meaningful could be determined from it.

Finally – as far as is known for certain – he kidnapped, raped and murdered 10 year old Sarah Harper. If his life up until that point had been a horror novel, his comeuppance was right out of a detective thriller. In 1990, he snatched a 6 year old girl off the street near the Scottish village of Stow, and bundled her into his van. He was spotted, the police were alerted, and he was caught doubling back. The girl was found stuffed head first in a sleeping bag by her own father.

After his arrest for this failed kidnapping, the British police began building a case against Black for other crimes, as had their American cousins after Carol DaRonch fought off her potential kidnapper, serial killer Ted Bundy.

In April 1994, he stood trial at Newcastle Crown Court for all three murders, and was convicted the following month.

Black is believed to have murdered a number of other young girls, including on the Continent, although he has never co-operated in the slightest with the authorities, nor even fed them red herrings. His responsibility for any other murders is of course a subject for intelligent speculation, but the one murder which most good judges believe he committed is that of Genette Tate. This thirteen year old schoolgirl disappeared literally off the face of the Earth from Aylesbeare, Devon, in August 1978. She had been delivering newspapers; her bicycle and some newspapers were scattered in the road.

Those of us who are old enough to remember this case will also remember the massive interest and resulting missing person investigation it generated. Serial killer Peter Tobin has also been named as a suspect in connection with Genette's disappearance and presumed murder, but Robert Black appears to be the stronger candidate.

A photograph of Genette Tate released at the time of her disappearance. Her body has never been found.

Returning to the current case, one of the detectives who worked on the Cardy investigation summed him up best as "a lost cause to humanity". Robert Black may be both exceptionally evil and proficient – if one may use that word – but sadly although he will be behind bars for the rest of his life, he is by no means unique.

Another report on the case of Robert Black can be found here.

[The above article was first published October 28, 2011. My obituary for Robert Black can be found here.]